AN AMERICAN WAY OF WAR
OR
WAY OF BATTLE?

Compiled by

LTC Antulio J. Echevarria II

Serious study of the American approach to waging war began in the early 1970s with the publication of Russell Weigley's *The American Way of War: A History of U.S. Military Strategy and Policy*. Examining how war was thought about and practiced by key U.S. military and political figures from George Washington to Robert McNamara, Weigley concluded that, except in the early days of the nation's existence, the American way of war centered on the desire to achieve a "crushing" military victory—either through a strategy of attrition or one of annihilation—over an adversary. U.S. military men and political leaders typically saw the destruction of an opponent's armed might and the occupation of his capital as marking the end of war and the beginning of post-war negotiations. Thus, Americans—not unlike many of their European counterparts—considered war an *alternative* to bargaining, rather than part of an ongoing bargaining process, as in the Clausewitzian view. In other words, the American concept of war rarely extended beyond the winning of battles and campaigns to the gritty work of turning military victory into strategic success. Consequently, the American way of war was—to rephrase Weigley's argument—more a way of *battle* than a way of war.

Although Weigley's interpretation has stood the test of time—with most of the criticism only highlighting the exceptions that prove the rule—one recent counter-argument deserves mention. Max Boot's *Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power*, published in 2002, contends that Americans have more than one way of war. Boot maintains that U.S. involvement in history's "small wars"—such as the Boxer Rebellion, the Philippine Insurrection, and contemporary interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo—actually outnumbers its participation in major conflicts and is, therefore, deserving of inclusion in any description of the American style of warfighting. These small wars were fought not to attain decisive victory over an opponent, but for reasons related to inflicting punishment, ensuring protection, achieving pacification, and benefiting from profiteering. Boot's interpretation, then, complements rather than displaces Weigley's by broadening its focus. The American way of war thus looks like the proverbial coin with two sides.

In some respects, these two sides of the same coin are at diametrical odds with one another. One side—the Weigley interpretation—ultimately provides the intellectual foundation for the Powell Doctrine, which, briefly stated, says that wars should be fought only for vital national interests and must have clear political objectives and popular support. It further emphasizes that the military should be allowed to use overwhelming force and that the political leadership must have a sound exit strategy

Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.

1. REPORT DATE 2004	2. REPORT TYPE N/A	3. DATES COVERED -

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE	5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
An American Way of War or Way of Battle?	5b. GRANT NUMBER
	5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S)	5d. PROJECT NUMBER
	5e. TASK NUMBER
	5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER

7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **U.S. Army War College 122 Forbes Avenue Carlisle, PA 17013-5234**	8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)	10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
	11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Approved for public release, distribution unlimited

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT

15. SUBJECT TERMS

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT UU	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 3	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT **unclassified**	b. ABSTRACT **unclassified**	c. THIS PAGE **unclassified**			

Standard Form 298 (Rev. 8-98)
Prescribed by ANSI Std Z39-18

for bringing the troops home. Put simply, the Powell doctrine tends to constrain how and why political leaders employ military force. Some might argue that this approach leaves the grammar of war to dictate its logic. The Boot interpretation, in contrast, describes a way of war that runs counter to the principles of the Powell Doctrine: it rarely involves vital interests, clear political goals, popular support, or overwhelming force, and routinely entails committing U.S. troops abroad for extended periods of time.

In one critical respect, however, the two interpretations agree: the American way of war tends to shy away from thinking about the complicated process of turning military triumphs—whether on the scale of major campaigns or small-unit actions—into strategic successes. In part, this tendency stems from a systemic bifurcation in American strategic thinking—though by no means unique to Americans—in which military professionals prefer to concentrate on winning battles and campaigns, while policymakers elect to focus on prevailing in the diplomatic struggles that precede and influence, or are affected by, the actual fighting. In other words, both the Weigley and Boot interpretations implicitly portray the American way of war as a way of battle more than a way of war.

This aspect of the American way of war becomes even more important when one considers that Boot's writings go further than just describing another aspect of the American way of war. In an article published in *Foreign Affairs* in 2003, he became one of the heralds of a *new* American way of war—one based to a certain extent on his thesis about the prevalence of small wars in U.S. history and their importance in the rise of American power. This new American way of war, according to Boot, eschews the traditional, industrial-age dependence on overwhelming force in favor of information-age characteristics, such as "speed, maneuver, flexibility, and surprise," all enabled by greater use of "precision firepower, special forces, and psychological operations" and jointness. Indeed, these characteristics bear a striking resemblance to the qualities of "speed, jointness, knowledge, and precision" currently championed in the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

However, this new American way of war risks falling into the same trap that snared both the Weigley and Boot versions of the traditional one because it also tends to confuse winning campaigns or small-scale actions with winning wars. After years of self-examination in the wake of Vietnam, U.S. strategic thinking finally reached the conclusion that winning a war really amounts to accomplishing one's strategic objectives. While this realization is taught in the higher echelons of professional military education and is subscribed to by leading defense intellectuals, recent events suggest that it is not yet a conscious part of the American way of war. The current capabilities-based approach to defense planning, for example, is ultimately about the hardware needed to move, shoot, and communicate across a global battlefield; in other words, it's about winning battles in the information age.

To move from a way of battle to a way of war, Americans must devote more time and energy to thinking about the capabilities needed to turn combat successes into favorable strategic outcomes. Happily, there is some reason for optimism. Recent studies have outlined a few tentative steps the United States might take to improve its

performance in post-conflict operations, such as creating a force specifically trained and equipped to conduct them. One can debate the merits of this answer and whether it would work without a corresponding change in military culture, but solutions have to start somewhere. Another possibility is revamping the capabilities-based approach into one based on achieving strategic outcomes. Without too much difficulty one could modify the emerging concept of effects-based planning, which is oriented more toward tactical and operational planning, into something useful at the strategic level of war as well as in force programming. This measure would help harmonize strategic planning with force design. Nonetheless, recognizing the value of such suggestions is still a considerable step from implementing them. Until the American way of war develops the capability to make the leap from victory on the battlefield to strategic success, it will remain merely a way of battle.